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SUBJECT: GETTING OUT IN FRONT ON HUMAN RIGHTS

REF: REF A. BOGOTA 1047; REF B. BOGOTA 1826; REF C. BOGOTA 2836
REF D. BOGOTA 2958

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) Our review of the principal human rights issues in Colombia has prompted Embassy Bogota to adopt a new human rights strategy that will more clearly state the USG's support for human rights here and those who defend them. We will adopt a rigorous agenda of meetings at the Ambassadorial and senior level with human rights groups who have received threats or allege to have been victims of state harassment. The Ambassador, DCM, and other senior Officers will systematically raise human rights concerns with President Uribe, Foreign Minister Bermudez, the Prosecutor General's Office and the Supreme Court, inter alia. The Ambassador will work with Defense Minister Silva to revive an informal consultation mechanism on human rights, supported by key international organizations. The Ambassador's central message is that human rights organizations perform an essential function in a healthy democratic society. Post will continue quarterly NGO consultations on our assistance to the military. In addition to press and diplomatic outreach, we will implement our human rights programs, including actions by U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), Department of Justice (DOJ), and the U.S. Military Group (MILGROUP). End Summary.

PROTECTING HUMAN RIGHTS REMAINS A CHALLENGE

¶2. (U) Colombia faces several disquieting human rights challenges. Chief among those are extrajudicial executions (EJEs), violence by illegal armed groups leading to internal displacements, illegal surveillance by the civilian and military intelligence agencies, and continuing threats against human rights defenders. While Embassy Bogota implements a wide array of human rights programs and maintains a healthy dialogue with Colombian NGOs, we plan to increase public and diplomatic activities that express USG support for the human rights community and advance our overall human rights goals.

SPEAKING WITH A CLEAR VOICE: PUBLIC OUTREACH

13. (U) We have heard repeatedly that human rights groups feel besieged by threats from illegal armed groups (refs A, B). There is also a "culture of threats" unhindered by the state, according to the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders. We intend to express our support for these groups through the following activities:

-- Ambassadorial Visits to NGOs Under Threat: The Ambassador visited the Colombian Commission of Jurists (CCJ) on September 4 (ref D). After a frank exchange of views, the Ambassador and CCJ Director gave a press conference in which the Ambassador emphasized the essential role of human rights defenders in a healthy democracy. We intend to make visits like these on a monthly basis. In future months the Ambassador and Deputy Chief of Mission plan to visit indigenous groups, labor unions, and Afro-Colombian organizations.

-- Ambassadorial and DCM Travel: We will look for opportunities to visit human rights groups during the Ambassador's and DCM's visits outside of Bogota. We will highlight USAID human rights projects in the field. Unless NGOs oppose it for their own security, we will publicize these visits.

-- Utilizing Network Technologies: The CCJ visit demonstrated the challenge in getting our main points out via the Colombian press. We will reinforce our message through alternative media, the Embassy's Facebook page, including clips of the Ambassador's comments in our weekly news program, and posting the Ambassador's statements on our public website.

-- Political Section Visits: Polcouns and Human Rights Officer will make less public but more frequent visits to human rights groups.

PROMPTING ACCOUNTABILITY: DIPLOMATIC EFFORTS

14. (U) Our dialogue with the GOC on human rights is a daily occurrence, but we will give priority to the following activities:

-- GOC Informal Consultative Mechanism: Ambassador has engaged the Foreign Minister, Minister of Defense, other ambassadors, and key international organizations with the hope of reviving a regular consultation to discuss the military's human rights performance (ref C).

-- The Ambassador, DCM, and other senior officers will systematically raise specific human rights concerns with President Uribe, Foreign Minister Bermudez, the Prosecutor General's Office, and the Supreme Court, inter alia.

-- Quarterly NGO Consultations: Although current legislation requires NGO consultations on the human rights certification every 180 days, Post believes it beneficial to maintain a 90-day schedule. Information from these consultations provides useful information in the Embassy's engagement with the GOC.

-- UNDP Labor Violence Study: As reported in septel, the UN Development Program launched a study, with Embassy support, to analyze the causes of violence against unionists in Colombia and provide recommendations for eliminating the causes of violence. These efforts, we hope, will produce the first comprehensive review of this phenomenon and inform our efforts to obtain the right kind of Free Trade Agreement with Colombia.

MAKING HEADWAY: PROGRAMMATIC ACTIVITIES

15. (U) USG-supported programs in Colombia are designed to help protect human rights, strengthen justice, and combat impunity:

-- USAID Programs: Provide support to the GOC and civil society to protect the human rights of the Colombian people, with a focus on vulnerable populations, increasing the legitimacy of human rights defenders, and strengthening the institutions responsible for monitoring and defending human rights.

-- DOJ Support to the Prosecutor General's Office: DOJ's Justice Sector Reform Project is targeting support to the Prosecutor General's Human Rights Unit, particularly in the area of extrajudicial executions by the military. The project aims to improve investigation and prosecution techniques, crime scene management, witness interviews, and use of forensic evidence. The Unit has made significant progress in more effective investigations and prosecutions resulting in increased convictions.

-- MILGROUP Support for Rules of Engagement (ROE): MILGROUP is working with the Ministry of Defense to define and implement its ROE and new human rights and international humanitarian law policies.
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